



Wisconsin Families, Children and Justice Initiative

Family problems that require court intervention constitute a large and growing portion of the work of Wisconsin courts. Changing family structures and weakening support systems are driving this trend. The growing involvement of the courts in the lives of dysfunctional families has raised concern among all who work with families in crisis.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court has been involved since 1995 in an effort to address this concern. This effort has sparked a number of projects that together are called the Wisconsin Families, Children and Justice Initiative.

Court Improvement Program targets child abuse and neglect cases

The Court Improvement Program is a federal grant program that has allowed the Wisconsin court system to assess its strengths and weaknesses in handling Children in Need of Protection and/or Services (CHIPS) cases.

In an effort to be responsive to the needs of different communities, the Wisconsin courts have developed a system to offer grants of federal money for pilot projects, improvements to existing programs and educational sessions around the state.

Court Improvement Projects

Dozens of court improvement projects relating to child abuse and/or neglect cases have been awarded funding ranging from \$1,870 to \$70,000. Here are summaries of the projects:

- A program to link the Milwaukee County District Attorney's Office, Guardian *ad Litem*'s Office, Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)/Adoption Unit and the Children's Court to one database. The database improves communication among agencies and creates a "fast track" to permanent homes for over 600 children in foster care. Liz Finn Gorski, Children's Court coordinator: (414) 454-4189.
- A project to educate local child welfare professionals on the cultures of Native Americans, African Americans, and Hmong. Denis Tucker, executive associate director, Cultural Competency Certification Program: (608) 781-5744.
- A videotape and handbook designed to educate parents, children and the community about the

juvenile court process. Lee Salzman, project director: (920) 929-3406.

- Two intensive, one-day conferences on the effects of trauma (from abuse or neglect) on childhood brain development. The conference helped the professionals who work with these children in the court system to better understand their treatment needs. Anne Arnesen, executive director, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families: (608) 284-0580.
- A project to assess the handling of cases where parental rights are terminated and develop an action plan for improving this process. Paul Moeller, supervisor, Kenosha County Division of Children and Family Services: (262) 605-6500.
- A program to teach parenting skills and provide support groups and connections to other community resources for parents in La Crosse County. Debra Suchla, executive director, Family Resources of La Crosse: (608) 784-8125.
- A program to move Kenosha, Racine and Waukesha County children with special needs from foster care to permanent homes by linking key decision makers in the permanency process. Colleen M. Ellingson, executive director, Special Needs Adoption Network: (262) 475-1246.
- A program to provide mentors for parents whose children have been identified by the courts as needing protection and/or services. Sandra Favor, project director: (608) 634-3104.

- A program to smooth the transition of child abuse and neglect cases involving Native American children from the state to the St. Croix Chippewa Tribal Court. Because tribal law permits appropriate children's cases to be referred to a peacemaking program, grant funding has also been provided for the development of such a program. Gloria Merrill, human services facilitator, St. Croix Chippewa tribe: (715) 349-2195.
 - A program to train family advocates statewide to act as mentors to parents and other family members involved in court proceedings related to child protection or services. Margaret Mezera, project director, Wisconsin Family Ties Mentoring Program: (608) 267-6888.
 - A program to implement a joint Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program which will serve both Columbia and Sauk Counties. The program will help the courts by training volunteers to monitor the home and school conditions of children involved in Children in Need of Protection and/or Services (CHIPS) cases. Carmel Capati, project director, Children and Family Services of South Central Wisconsin, Inc.: (608) 742-5344.
 - A Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program in La Crosse County. The program trains volunteers to monitor and advocate for abused and neglected children. Nora Schubert, project director, Coulee Region YWCA: (608) 781-2783.
 - Creation and training of Barron County Child Advocacy Teams to provide alternative dispute resolution in child abuse and neglect cases. Sue Nelson, director, Mediation Center: (715) 653-2516.
 - A conference for judges, attorneys, human service workers and others involved in child abuse and neglect cases on the impact of domestic violence on children. Sharon Lewandowski, coordinator, Domestic Abuse Program, Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services: (608) 266-0700.
 - A program to install computers in courtrooms where juvenile cases are heard. This enables prosecutors to present each party and the court with a written order and warnings of possible termination of parental rights by the end of a hearing. As a result, delays in Children in Need of Protection and/or Services (CHIPS) cases will be reduced. Robert S. Flancher, district attorney, Racine County: (262) 636-3172.
 - A program to provide medical, psychological and/or behavioral assessments at the first court hearing for individuals who cannot afford the cost of such assessments, yet do not qualify for funding assistance from the government. By completing these assessments earlier in the process, these individuals make valuable information available to the courts to assist in the process of deciding where to place children and what services might benefit family members to achieve permanency for children faster. (see also *A New Approach to Helping Families Involved in Multiple Court Cases*). Tom Weber, project director, Monroe County Justice: (608) 269-8787.
 - Expansion of the Voices for Children Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program in Kenosha. This program was started in 1997 and provides trained volunteers to monitor children who are involved in abuse or neglect cases. The CASA volunteers conduct weekly home visits ensuring that necessary services are being provided, that court orders are being followed, and that the placement continues to be in the best interest of the child. Jeanne Pataska, executive director, AODA Council of Kenosha County: (262) 658-8166.
 - Creation of a model system for handling incidents of child abuse and neglect cases in Milwaukee County that result in both civil and criminal proceedings. The model consists of a prosecutor, case manager, and victim advocate, who work together to overcome geographic barriers, information voids, and lack of staff time to ensure effective investigation of allegations of child abuse and neglect Ann Rulseh, Children's Justice Act coordinator: (608) 266-3934.
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- ### Promoting Safe Families
- Nearly 200 people gathered in Madison in November 1998 for a two-day conference entitled *Promoting Safe Families: Wisconsin Court Improvement Strategies*, sponsored by the Wisconsin Supreme Court and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Participants included members of the legal, education, law enforcement, mental health and health care communities, along with social workers, foster and adoptive parents and staff of numerous organizations that work with families and children.
- Through a series of 12 workshops, participants were encouraged to exchange information on child abuse and neglect and discuss how the courts can best handle these

difficult cases. Topics included mediation, education, and mentoring for parents involved in CHIPS cases; the unified family court approach, and the evolving role of judges in child abuse and neglect cases, among others. There were studies of CHIPS improvement strategies operating in Dane, La Crosse and Milwaukee Counties, and Kenosha County's Termination of Parental Rights Processing Improvements and Project Fast Track Adoption. The conference also provided education on the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, a major piece of child welfare legislation which focuses on establishing timely permanence and stronger safety guarantees for children.

The conference binder is available at the Wisconsin State Law Library or by contacting Michelle Jensen at (608) 266-1557.

Permanency planning in Milwaukee County

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded more than half a million dollars for a three-year permanency project for children in Milwaukee County. The project began in October 1998.

The Director of State Courts Office submitted the grant proposal to the Administration for Children and Families requesting \$511,200 to implement innovative case processing in child abuse and neglect cases in Milwaukee County Children's Court.

The proposal, titled the Milwaukee Permanency Project, has three objectives:

- to facilitate collaboration between child welfare agencies and the court;
- to reduce the amount of time between initial agency involvement with a family, the execution of a termination of parental rights (TPR), where appropriate, and the finalization of an adoption; and
- to test the effectiveness of mediation and other forms of alternative dispute resolution methods employed to facilitate the resolution of child welfare cases.

The goals of the Milwaukee Permanency Project will be accomplished by conducting training for professionals working in Children's Court, implementing an early identification process for cases that should be placed on a fast track and utilizing mediation at various points in the process.

A new approach to serving families involved in multiple court cases

The complicated problems that one family may present—divorce, child abuse and juvenile delinquency, to name a few—often mean several court cases are in

front of different judges. The unified court approach suggests keeping one family's cases before just one judge. Pilot programs in La Crosse and Monroe counties are looking at how elements of this approach might be used within the current court structure.

The Wisconsin Court Improvement Program awarded a grant to fund medical, psychological and/or behavioral assessments for individuals involved in the Monroe County Unified Family Court Project who cannot afford the cost of such assessments, yet do not qualify for funding assistance from the government. These assessments are ordered at the first court hearing and provide valuable information to the courts to assist in the process of deciding where to place children, and what services might benefit family members.

The Confidentiality Project

In October 1999, a group of 46 judges, lawyers, public and private family service providers, law enforcement personnel, physicians, educators, legislators, representatives of the Wisconsin Department of Justice and tribal leaders from Wisconsin's Native American community met in Madison for a five-hour, facilitated discussion of issues relating to children, families, confidentiality and the justice system. The group is serving as the advisory board to The Confidentiality Project, a joint effort of the Children's Justice Act and the Court Improvement Program. The project is designed to examine and clarify confidentiality provisions in Wisconsin statutes, regulations and practices. This will make it easier for various agencies and the courts to share information on children and families in the justice system in order to provide them with the best service.

The Confidentiality Project advisory board is focusing its work specifically on cases involving children in need of protection and/or services.

Addressing domestic violence

The Milwaukee County Circuit Court in 1999 received nearly \$2 million in federal grant funds to improve services to victims and treatment for offenders in domestic violence cases. The grant will allow for the addition of emergency personal advocates for victims, who will assist victims in finding emergency housing, transportation and child care. In addition, four new assistant district attorneys and a court commissioner will be dedicated to domestic violence cases.

These changes will support goals that have been set in areas targeted for improvement in Milwaukee County. These goals include enhanced services to victims and better treatment, oversight, and accountability of offenders.

Since 1994, the Milwaukee courts have been working to address domestic violence more effectively. They have dedicated three specialty courts to domestic violence cases, and the district attorney has implemented new charging policies and bolstered its domestic violence unit. At the same time, community organizations have expanded services to victims and refined batterer programs to meet the needs of specific groups such as diverse racial and ethnic groups, the elderly and the physically challenged.

For judges across the state, a specialty seminar has been designed to broaden knowledge and skills in sentencing, treatment and management of domestic violence cases.

The seminar debuted in 1998 and was offered again in June 1999 and in June 2000 (as part of a seminar on elder law).

Training for judges and social workers

A *Child Abuse and Neglect Specialty Seminar*, was held in March 2000 to give judges the information they need to provide effective oversight in cases involving children in need of protection and/or services (CHIPS). The seminar provided judges with new ideas for handling substance abuse issues in CHIPS cases, research on child development and family dynamics, and recommendations on how to effectively implement the requirements of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. A similar training is being planned for March 2002.

In November 1998, more than 200 people gathered in Madison for a two-day conference, *Promoting Safe Families: Wisconsin Court Improvement Strategies*. The conference, which featured workshops on successful programs from around the state, helped judges and social workers exchange information on issues of child abuse and neglect, and sparked discussion of how the courts can best handle these difficult cases.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sponsored the conference.

In December 1997, the Director of State Courts Office teamed up with the Wisconsin County Human Service Association to co-sponsor a seminar, *Common Issues for Courts and Human Services*. The seminar, held in Madison, presented a valuable opportunity for judges, social workers, county board supervisors and others to attend workshops on such issues as psychological testing, assessing the risks presented by delinquent youth and children's adjustment to foster care.

A *Coordinated Approach to Family Law Cases*, held in November 1997 in Racine brought together people representing a broad range of disciplines so that all who work to assist families and children in the courts can be involved in improving the system. Also known as the "Wingspread" Conference, this event featured a keynote address from Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala.

Project Safe Start

Racine County, with assistance from the Office of the Chief Justice, was awarded a \$100,000 planning grant from the U.S. Department of Justice in 1997 to establish the framework for a comprehensive, community-based response to adolescent pregnancy and domestic violence using new and existing services. With the federal funds, Racine County is developing a model program to address these problems, with special emphasis on the relationship between battering and adolescent pregnancy.